

AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY

A FREE COLUMN FOR NEWSPAPERS BY TED KOOSER, THE POET LAUREATE OF THE UNITED STATES

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American Life in Poetry: Column 008

BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE

Thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of poems have been written to express the grief of losing a parent. Many of the most telling of these attach the sense of loss to some object, some personal thing left behind, as in this elegy to her mother by a Nebraskan, Karma Larsen:

Moonflowers

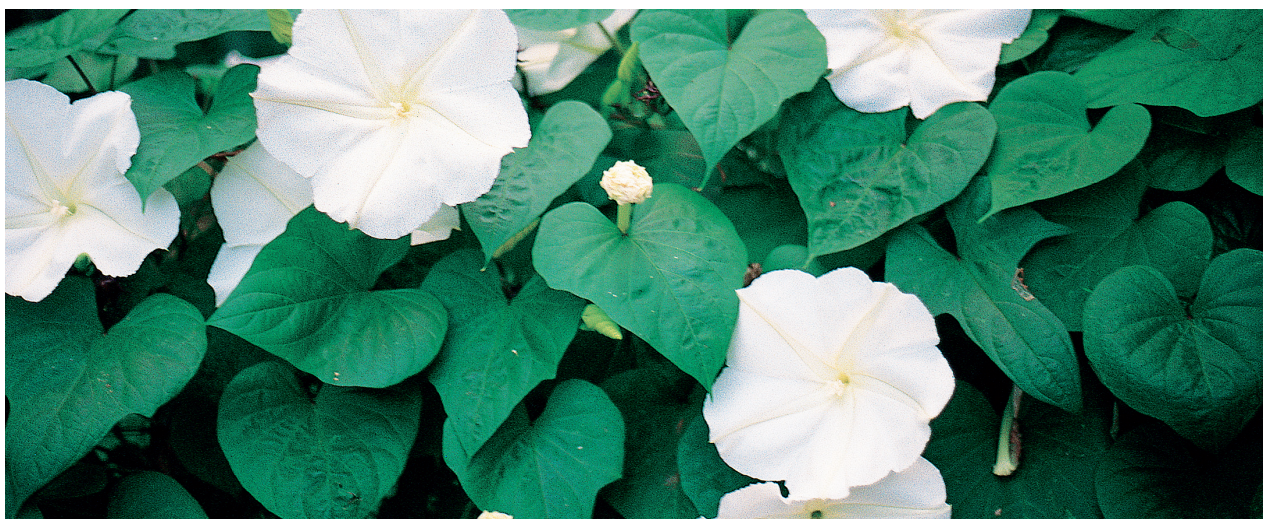
Milly Sorensen, January 16, 1922 - February 19, 2004

It was the moonflowers that surprised us.
Early summer we noticed the soft gray foliage.
She asked for seedpods every year but I never saw them in her garden.
Never knew what she did with them.
Exotic and tropical, not like her other flowers.
I expected her to throw them in the pasture maybe,
a gift to the coyotes. Huge, platterlike white flowers
shining in the night to soften their plaintive howling.
A sound I love; a reminder, even on the darkest night,
that manicured lawns don't surround me.

Midsummer they shot up, filled the small place by the back door,
sprawled over sidewalks, refused to be ignored.
Gaudy and awkward by day,
by night they were huge, soft, luminous.
Only this year, this year of her death
did they break free of their huge, prickly husks
and brighten the darkness she left.

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Discussion Questions for “Moonflowers” by Karma Larsen

Literal Comprehension Questions

1. How are moonflowers different from the flowers in the poet’s mother’s garden?
2. What color are the moonflowers?
3. When did the moonflowers bloom?
4. Where did the moonflowers bloom?

Inference and Figurative Language Questions

These questions ask learners to use their personal experience and life knowledge to look for deeper meanings that aren’t explicitly stated in the text and to interpret figurative language.

1. Describe the poet’s mother. What kind of person was she?
2. Why did the poet’s mother plant the seedpods where she did?
3. What does a manicured lawn imply?
4. What type of area does the writer live in?
5. Why do you think the moonflowers refused to be ignored?
6. What does the poet mean by “brighten the darkness”?
7. What images does the poem evoke?

Evaluation, Experience, and Appreciation Questions

These higher order questions ask learners to make judgments by comparing material in one text with other material or with their own knowledge. Learners also give emotional and aesthetic responses to the poem.

1. What is your favorite line(s) in the poem? Why?
2. Do you identify with any of the characters or events in the poem? Explain.
3. Think of an important person in your life. Make a list of qualities and actions of that person. Based on one or more of the items in your list, think of a flower or other object that could represent him or her. Which qualities or actions did you choose?

Question taxonomy based on Barrett (1968), cited in Alderson, J. C. and A. H. Urquhart, eds. 1984. *Reading in a foreign language*. London: Longman.